

You Pick The Sermon: Where Was God When...?
By Jason Huff
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Lamentations 3:46-66; Isaiah 53:1-5; John 11:11-44

Our final Scripture reading tonight is John 11:11-44. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy word. "After [Jesus] had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.

"Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

Last week, we tackled our hardest You Pick The Sermon topic so far -- the issue of war in the Bible and why God commanded it at times in the history of Israel, how God is kind and compassionate while truly just. We didn't solve every issue but we began the conversation.

This week, though, makes last week look like child play. The question is, "Where was God?" I won't share the full details of the question, but it asked about the existence of God in the face of personal horrors – everything from horrific sexual abuse to abandonment of a spouse. Where is God? In a world where rape is a sad reality, where oppression of all sorts causes people physical and emotional scars, where life is cheap, where people are sold into sweatshops and sexual slavery, where drunk drivers walk away from wrecks that kill children, where is God?

These terrors make us question whether God even exists. It seems better to attribute all those things to a godless universe. It seems that God is either powerless to stop them or viciously cruel because He doesn't use His power to stop them from happening. The question plagues every world religion and every philosopher worth his salt. We must answer the question to be satisfied with our faith. If we cannot come up with some legitimate reasons for the cruelty and suffering in this world and why God allows it, then our faith rests on very shaky ground.

For several months, our Bible study series has been on suffering and the sovereignty of God. We learned that God is never surprised by suffering, that He retains control of all things through suffering, and that God does indeed have purposes for suffering. The series was taught by R.C. Sproul Jr., who suffered through cancer treatment and then lost his wife and his daughter within an eighteen-month period, and it deals well many aspects of this question.

The series describes many biblical reasons why suffering occurs. They range from God showing His power in the lives of suffering people to God showing the perseverance of His saints in spite of suffering. If this is a stumbling block in your faith, I encourage you to dig deeper. I would be happy to lend you the series if it would be helpful. But the truth is, we don't know why God allows our own -- personal, individual -- suffering. I believe we will someday, but not on this side of heaven. So today, we're going to deal with the answers that are most comforting in dealing with our doubts about suffering regardless of what it is we're suffering.

The first way we know God is concerned about our suffering is because *lament is all over Scripture*. Two whole books of the Bible – Job and Lamentations – are about the suffering of God's people and their reactions to it. The Psalms are full of lament, of God's people questioning God about their suffering and why God hasn't relieved it yet. We hear lament from Jacob when he hears the false report that his favorite son Joseph is dead. We hear it over barrenness, over the loss of friends and loved ones, over gloating enemies and faithless friends. Jesus repeats the words of lament from Psalm 22 on the cross – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The Bible describes suffering – unfair, awful, painful suffering – with utmost respect and candor. Buddhism, Hinduism, and many Eastern religions believe this world is an illusion, and suffering is an illusion brought on by attachment to earthly things, including other people. They teach the way out of suffering is enlightenment and detachment. But I cannot believe that when someone is attacked, hurt, maimed, or violated, that it's not real. And neither does Scripture. Scripture relates the suffering of God's people and does not pretty it up or pretend it isn't genuine.

It also encourages us to lament, to cry out to God. He is the only place we find hope and peace in the midst of genuine suffering. Scripture says, “A sad face is good for the heart of a man.” We’re taught, “Sorrow lasts for the night, but joy comes in the morning.” James tells us to “grieve with those who grieve and rejoice with those who rejoice.” People used to cover themselves with sackcloth and ashes in their grief. They were miserable; they didn’t pretend that everything was OK.

The other day, I turned on a “positive and encouraging” Christian radio station. The DJ apologized that the next song talked about life being difficult! Then he said, “Maybe you’ve got a funeral today. Put on a smile and a joyful face anyway – someone else might need it.” And I swore at the radio! This radio station might be positive and encouraging, but that wasn’t Christian! Christianity is about coming into a relationship with the most high God, and that means bringing all of life, including suffering and lament, to Him.

What the DJ encouraged was a belief called Stoicism – the idea that we should be emotionless in the face of trouble and heartache. Stoicism was a religious system that tried to derail Christianity. God is not a Stoic, and He doesn’t ask His people to be. You have the right to lament, to wonder, “Where was God?” when you contemplate the heartaches of life. You do not have to pretend to be happy, and you don’t have to pretend that it’s not real. Because God tells us to do no such thing.

And that’s because of what forms the second reason we know God cares about our suffering: *He mourns for us and with us, and does something about the causes of our grief.* God is unchanging and nothing surprises Him, so we can’t hurt God by hurting ourselves or anyone else. We cannot force God to feel anything. And yet God chooses to grieve with us.

Before Noah and the flood, God is grieved that He even made us because we have caused so much suffering and sin amongst ourselves, disobeying every instinct for obedience He created in us. Israel’s actions grieve God in the Old Testament. He cannot bless those who deliberately disobey, and yet it is His desire to be with His people and bless their work.

And if we see it in the Old Testament here and there, we see God’s grieving with us in full force through Jesus Christ. Isaiah describes Jesus as a “man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.” When His friend Lazarus dies, Jesus goes to comfort Mary and Martha. He is described twice as deeply moved, and troubled.

The shortest verse in the Bible is about Lazarus: “Jesus wept.” Jesus would raise Lazarus from the dead. It would bring people to believe in Him. Jesus was in control. Yet He mourned. He grieved deeply – not just at the loss of His friend, but for all the suffering in the world, and the grief that death itself brings. He came so that death would not have the final word.

Jesus famously grieves over Jerusalem, too. He mourns over it, saying, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” How Jesus wanted to see His people obey His Father! How Jesus desired for them to receive His blessing and mercy!

And Jesus shows immense compassion throughout His ministry on the grieving and suffering. How many healings do we read about? Raisings of the dead? Lives changed? Sins forgiven? It was so huge that we read Jesus went throughout the countryside meeting the people, healing all the sick and freeing all the oppressed from demons and disease. Jesus' earthly life was marked by grief over the world's situation, compassion for the suffering, and a willingness to step in and heal the scars.

But that's not the biggest reason I believe that God is with us in the midst of our darkest hours and deepest hurts and secrets. The biggest reason that I believe God never leaves us in our horrors is that *He not only mourns with us in our suffering and heals our suffering, in Jesus Christ He suffers with us and for us.*

Jesus suffered a lot more in His earthly life than we ever imagine. He was despised by the very people He came to save. When He claims to be the Messiah, He is moments away from being stoned. His own family thinks He's gone over the edge. Crowds who've gotten their fill of His bread and fish desert when He stops multiplying the loaves. He's normally without a bed, lacking basics of life. They want signs that He is the Son of God, and when they see them, they are so afraid they ask Him to go away.

And this would be hard enough for an extraordinary man, for a great leader or prophet. But Jesus is not just a man, a leader, or a prophet. He is God the Son in flesh, come to meet with us. He is the Son of the Father, the One who participated in the creation of all that exists, who by rights should be adored and worshipped by everything in the universe, whom even the rocks would sing about if we remain silent! And He gives all that up, suffering beside us.

And we cannot imagine the suffering of the cross. What we can read a description about in six minutes or watch in a two and a half hour movie took well over nine hours to occur; we have no idea what details are missing. In a culture defined by honor and shame, Jesus was shamed in the worst way. He is beaten, mocked, stripped bare and splayed on a cross for all to see. Isaiah says, "we considered him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted."

While many of us carry our shame in secret, hidden away from view, Jesus was humiliated in the most public way possible. He has done nothing to deserve it. He is a victim – a victim of human injustice, of human rejection of God and God's Son and God's ways. For nine hours in front of all who cared to see, He was shamed in such a way that no one could ever believe that this man was or could ever be King of the Jews, let alone the messiah or God's Son.

And yet He did it in spite of the fact that He in no way deserved it, in spite of the fact that we in our sinfulness caused the need for it to happen, in spite of the fact that many would still refuse to believe after He came back from the dead. He suffered for us, for our sake, so that we could be forgiven. He suffered so that we might be made whole and could spend eternity with the loving God who made us. He suffered immense shame so that we could be healed of our own guilt and shame. He forgave those who crucified Him while it was still happening, so we could forgive those who hurt us.

But He didn't just die to carry our sins and to suffer for us. He suffers with us. In our last few minutes together, I want to focus on a couple things we miss in our study of Jesus. We heard Isaiah 53:4 tonight – “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.” Usually, we focus on Isaiah 53:5 – “he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” We focus on how Jesus, on the cross, took the full penalty for our sins on Himself. But Isaiah 53:4 tells us something else. “He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.”

Those aren't metaphors for sin. “Infirmities” is sickness and disease in Hebrew. “Sorrow” is mental anguish. When Jesus goes to the cross, the weight of the result of sin is on Him too. He suffers with the abuse victim, with the mother who's lost her child in a car wreck, with the spouse who loses her husband far too early. On the cross, He carries the weight of the anguish of all the betrayals, all the hurts, all the suffering this world and its brokenness has imposed.

We who are believers are one with Christ. We are one with Him in His life, in His death, in His suffering, and in His glory. And He is one with us. He does not abandon us in our dark hours, whether the shame of what someone has done to us or the guilt of what we've done to someone else. We are united with Christ. If you have suffered, you have not suffered alone.

Many of us have heard the poem *Footprints in the Sand* by Mary Stevenson. I'm going to tell it to you if you haven't, and then I'm going to add something. Here's what it says. “One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints; other times there were one set of footprints. This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints.”

So I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there have only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, you have not been there for me?" The Lord replied, "The times when you have seen only one set of footprints, is when I carried you."

That poem is so repeated that it's a cliché. But the poem has it right – it just stops too soon. Jesus doesn't just carry the faithful through the most difficult times in our lives and make sense of the tragedies we've experienced. He carries those sorrows all the way to the cross and nails them there for us. We do not need to suffer them any more. Christ has suffered for us, beside us, and with us. He has been there. He will always be there, for all who believe.

The final question for us tonight then is simply this: are you holding on to some incredible pain in your past, some awful guilt, for something you did or something done to you, something that makes you question God's existence or concern for you? You may have believed in Christ but cannot let go of the past and doubt Him as a result. You have two choices before you tonight. You can choose to remain a victim, to let those awful and very real scars define your existence, reject God, and continue to let that pain shape you until all you have left is the bitterness of those events. That would truly be tragic.

Or you can embrace Christ and let Him heal you. Though it could take an instant, it will likely take more than that. You will likely need the support of friends and family and others to overcome some of the lasting effects. But if you simply will let Christ in, knowing that He suffered for you and with you, He will do what He promised. You will know His presence. You will know His peace. Take that step tonight and find the joy in Him that will defeat every sorrow you've ever known.